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UM nutritionist has good news about teen dieting

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NEWS RELEASE

This release is available electronically on INN (News Net.)

Dec. 17, 1997

Contact: Kathleen Humphries, visiting instructor, (406) 243-5177.

UM NUTRITIONIST HAS GOOD NEWS ABOUT TEEN DIETING (see sidebar)

MISSOULA--

People alarmed at reports that up to 94 percent of adolescent girls diet and thereby ruin their health can relax, according to a nutritionist at The University of Montana-Missoula.

Those reports are based on what adolescent girls say they're doing, not what they actually do, says Kathleen Humphries, a visiting instructor in UM's Department of Health and Human Performance.

"Most girls diet in a way we wouldn't call dieting," Humphries says. "In my research, the girls who reported dieting heavily weren't good at it, and that protected them physiologically. They were protected by their adolescent impulsiveness."

Humphries studied 63 girls 14-18 years of age at a Midwest boarding school for the fine and performing arts. She chose these girls because demographically they were at "highest risk for dieting." At the beginning of the nine-month study, the girls filled out a general information questionnaire asking whether they followed a particular diet and, if so, what kind -- diabetic, allergy, vegetarian, weight loss or other. Then each week during the study, the girls filled out a four-page weekly health report form about their physical activity, how they were feeling, what fruits and vegetables they had eaten the day before, how much dieting they did and what their diet consisted of.

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From these weekly health reports, Humphries created a dieting score based on how much and how often the girls dieted. Several months before school recessed, she did a three-day food intake record of everything each girl ate over the three days. The girls could eat anything they chose.

They weighed all their food. Humphries also weighed it and analyzed it for nutritional content. She then compared their food intake to the dieting score created from the health report forms. She also compared their food intake to a report of dieting during the three days. This report asked whether they had made any changes in food intake to lose weight and whether they were concerned about their weight over the three-day period.

Humphries found no difference in food intake between girls who said they had made a change and those who said they hadn't. The diets were exactly the same in fats, carbohydrates, protein and 15 other essential nutrients, she says.

For girls who said they were concerned about their weight during the three days, there were couple of differences, Humphries says: Their carbohydrate intake was slightly higher, their fat intake slightly lower.

"But both groups were well within the recommendations for good health," Humphries says. "In fact, the girls who said they were eating to lose weight had higher intakes of B6, folate and iron -- three essential nutrients that are usually low in high school girls we're worried about."

So what's going on with adolescent girls who say they're dieting? It's easier to understand by looking at the five steps in Humphries' definition of dieting: concern about health, appearance, social pressure or the job; desire to lose weight; intention to diet; behavior

to accomplish the desired weight loss; and the actual outcome of losing weight.

“In these girls I saw concern about their weight and, in some girls, desire to lose weight,” she says. “And nothing else. There’s really not much intent. There’s no plan, there’s no behavior. When I asked what their diet consisted of, they said things like ‘Oh, I feel so guilty.’ Their diet consisted of feeling guilty. No exercise, no dietary changes, no diet pills.”

Humphries concludes that reports stating anywhere from 15 percent to 94 percent of adolescent girls diet are based on studies that don’t take subjects beyond what would be the first two steps in her definition. That, she says, could explain why the figures range too widely and too high for her to view them as accurate.

That’s the good news. The bad news is that a population of girls does exist who are at risk for dieting behaviors, Humphries says.

“They’re the nice girls,” she says. “They’re our highest achieving girls, the girls who go on to college so they’re from higher socioeconomic status groups. Their parents are usually well-educated. They’re the best of our nation, our future leaders.”

These girls are at risk, she says, because they’re good at dieting, just as they’re good at everything else.

“These girls say they’re going to lose weight, and, by golly, they lose weight,” Humphries says. And they are among the .5 percent of high school girls who develop anorexia nervosa and endanger their health, she says.

“That’s too many,” she says. “But it’s not 94 percent.”

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NUTRITIONIST'S TIPS FOR CONCERNED PARENTS (sidebar)

MISSOULA--

For parents concerned about their teen-agers' dieting, UM nutritionist Kathleen Humphries has a few suggestions.

- Recognize that teens and pre-teens want to exert some control over their food intake.

Let them help shop for groceries. Let them cook one night a week for the family.

- Don't try to teach them how to diet. That may have some bad outcomes.

■ Show a good example to your teen-age girls by being active yourselves and get the girls engaged in some kind of physical activity. Research shows a strong correlation between active children and active mothers. The correlation is less strong for active fathers.

The key to lifelong weight management is "moving," Humphries says. During the holiday season, she says, "have fun, get outside, move. Have an active holiday season. Holidays don't need to be food based.

"One pie is as good as four," she says. "Everybody gets a piece, and then it's gone."

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